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ABSTRACT

This paper looks at how institutional perceptions of marginalized groups of students affect their achievement, and argues that an "identifying process" involving students' own construction of themselves is necessary to academic success. In New Zealand, schools focus on the ethnicity of Pasifika (Pacific Islander) students in terms of low socioeconomic status and poor academic achievement and do not take into account students' own interpretations of their ethnicity. To examine the perceptions of schools and students, a methodology of "mediated dialogue" was developed, in which focus groups of Pasifika students and non-Pasifika teachers were interviewed separately. The mediator relayed comments between the groups, allowing each group the opportunity to hear the perceptions of the others and to respond and clarify its own opinions. The teachers tended to perceive Pasifika students as newly arrived immigrants from the Pacific Islands with poor English skills that restricted their learning. In fact, most of the students had been born in New Zealand and did not think of themselves in socioeconomic terms. If the process by which minority students construct their identity, and the results of it, are not valued by the school, it becomes more difficult for these students to see themselves in the processes and structures of the school and to feel a sense of belonging in the school system. Ways in which the schools might encourage and recognize students' identifying process are discussed. (SV)

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The Social Construction of Marginality: Globalization's Impact on the Disenfranchised

# Who do you say I am? – Explaining the Marginalized Status of Pasifika[1] students' Academic Achievement by Examining the Conflict between Institutional Perceptions and the 'Identifying Process'

*Camille Nakhid*



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# Who do you say I am? – Explaining the Marginalized Status of Pasifika[1] students' Academic Achievement by Examining the Conflict between Institutional Perceptions and the 'Identifying Process'

*Camille Nakhid*

**Abstract**
*This paper looks at how institutional perceptions held of marginalized groups of students affect their achievement, and argues that an "identifying process" involving the students' own construction of themselves is necessary to academic success. In New Zealand, schools interpret Pasifika ethnicity in terms of low socio-economic status and poor academic achievement, and do not take into account the students' own interpretations of their ethnicity. This paper claims that schools that fail to recognize the importance of an identifying process to students deny students' recognition of themselves in the education system. Using the methodology of 'mediated dialogue' to allow for students and teachers to examine the accuracy of the perceptions that they hold of each other, through the author acting as a mediator, it becomes possible to determine the value given by the schools to this 'identifying process'.*

With globalization comes the presence of contrasting identities. In New Zealand schools, the contrast that exists between the identities of different ethnic groups can, and does, lead to conflict. For the majority of students of Pacific Islands ethnicity, the consequences of this conflict include poor academic performance, failing grades, high truancy, and low retention rates (ERO, 1996).
This paper focuses on the situation of Pasifika students in New Zealand as a particular group of students marginalized by the presence of a contrasting yet dominant identity within New Zealand's education system. Ultimately, the aim of this paper is to call for dominant groups to recognize and

[1] The term Pasifika is used collectively to refer to the people or students from the islands of the Pacific who have identified as coming from, or having their ethnicity originate from there (Statistics New Zealand website). The term can be challenged for its inability to account for the many different Pacific islands, languages, customs, and histories that the term is meant to represent. However, one of the fundamental reasons for using the word 'Pasifika' is that the students from the islands in the Pacific with significant student populations in New Zealand, and who identify as Tongan, Tuvaluan, Samoan, Solomon Islanders, Fijians, Niueans, Cook Islanders, Papua New Guineans etc perform significantly below students from the main ethnic group of Pakeha or white New Zealander. These Pacific island groups also have similar statistics in New Zealand in terms of employment, and economics. It is because of the relationship between these similarities, and New Zealand's own definition and use of the term that it makes sense to look at 'Pasifika students' as a group to explain their level of academic achievement.

value what I have called the 'identifying process' of both themselves and other less dominant groups if further disenfranchisement of the latter is to be prevented. Within educational institutions, the failure to value this 'identifying process' is hypothesised to have adverse effects on the academic achievement of students such as those from the Pacific Islands.

In New Zealand, Pasifika students identify as having their ancestry, language and culture from the islands of Tuvalu, Samoa, Tonga, Fiji, Cook Islands, Papua New Guinea, Solomon Islands etc, and the term Pasifika describes an ethnic minority, not only in terms of numbers, but in terms of power (Cook et al, 1999). The dominant Pakeha culture that is found in New Zealand schools has little in common with the culture of Pasifika students and the hostilities that result when traditional methods of formal schooling conflict with the different cultural values of these students have produced classrooms of unmotivated and unsuccessful learners[2] (Garden, 1998).

Educational discussions surrounding Pasifika students generally focus on their low socio-economic conditions and poor academic achievement. As a result, Pasifika ethnicity is implied in the relationship between low socio-economic status and poor academic achievement. By continually linking these three factors together - low socio-economic status, underachievement, and Pasifika ethnicity - educators subconsciously ascribe to Pasifika people an identity that is defined in terms of shortcomings. But is it how Pasifika students would define and identify themselves? More importantly, what are the consequences of identifying them in this way?

This paper hypothesizes that the explicit or implicit perceptions that schools hold of Pasifika students frame their responses to these students. If the perceptions held by the schools are incongruent with the perceptions held by these students of themselves, we would expect the responses to be inappropriate. Therefore, we need to be able to determine whether or not the perceptions that the schools hold of Pasifika students differ from those held by the students themselves. The main barrier to determining this is that the conflict between the cultural capital of Pasifika students and that of the school makes communication between the two groups potentially difficult. In response, a methodology of 'mediated dialogue' was developed that would allow access to the conversations between students and teachers other than those conversations that take place within the classroom. This 'mediated dialogue' involved interviewing focus groups of Pasifika students and non-Pasifika teachers separately, with comments being relayed back to the groups. This allowed the two groups to speak to each other, through me as researcher and mediator, in order to represent more authentically the groups' perceptions of each other, and to provide both students and teachers with the opportunity to actually 'hear', rather than to assume, what the perceptions were. The methodology allowed the participants to respond to the claims made by the other groups, for the participants and myself to seek clarification on issues of concern, and to confirm the accuracy of the perceptions and opinions held by the participants.

[2] On the Third International Mathematics and Science Tests carried out in 1994 and 1996, Pasifika students scored lowest of all the categorized ethnic groups in New Zealand. They also showed the greatest percentage decline in progress as their years of schooling increased. The most recent statistics available showed that in 1999, high school or secondary level Pasifika students made up 7.4% of the student population but represented only 4.2% of all students leaving school that year with an A or B university entrance qualification. This compares with 4.1% Maori, 22.7% European/Pakeha and 44.2% Asian students. Of all students leaving high school with no formal qualifications, 26.7% were Pasifika students, 35.0% Maori, 12.3% European/Pakeha, and 7.6% Asian students.

One of the aims of the 'mediated dialogue' was to establish the way in which the students and teachers believed the schools responded to the perceptions and interpretations held by the teachers and, from this, to determine the existence of an 'identifying process' and the value given to it by the school. My role as mediator-researcher was not to reconcile the differences in perceptions, if any, between the groups, but to determine what those differences were. A number of factors permitted my credibility to be an effective mediator. I had lived and taught in Samoa, and had spent more than ten years as a mathematics teacher of Pasifika students. I was familiar with the physical gestures and vocabulary used by the students in their conversations, and with their experiences, both familial and parochial. The difference between my ethnicity as a Trinbagonian and that of the students and teachers (who were predominantly European) might also have helped to portray an image of fairness. My professional similarities with the teachers meant that I was able to visualize the classroom situations they described and empathize with the views that they expressed. I recognized the teachers' experiences and in many cases, had some idea of the reasons for their opinions.
The methodology involved having two rounds of "dialogues" in which three focus group sessions - two groups of Pasifika students and one group of teachers - took place. The time lapse between the two sets of interviews was as small as possible to ensure continuity of the dialogues.

One of the contributions that the "mediated dialogues" made towards understanding the situation of Pasifika students in schools was to establish the emphasis for both teachers and students of the ascribed characteristics typically associated with Pasifika students. Pasifika students did not see their socio-economic status as a determining factor in their educational experiences. Although it is possible that their socio-economic status may have influenced how they perceived school, it was not the primary context from which they viewed their educational experience. To the students, their identity as a Pasifika person, rather than their socio-economic status, played a more significant role in how they understood their educational experiences. The dialogue also revealed that the teachers and schools' interpretations of Pasifika identity and ethnicity were used to decide the position of these students in education, while Pasifika students' own interpretations were not accounted for. The students' lack of representation in the cultural and institutional practices of education was used to justify, allow and legitimate the privileged position of the more dominantly represented groups. To the teachers, the Pasifika students were continually perceived as newly arrived immigrants from the Pacific Islands with poor English skills that restricted their learning. This perception did not find favour with the students, the majority of whom, both in the study and in the schools, were born in New Zealand.
While it was not unexpected that the mutual perceptions held by teachers and students did not complement each other, the point of the 'mediated dialogue' was to indicate more precisely the dimensions and depth of the dissonance created in the contact between the teachers and students. The dialogues showed that few opportunities were given to Pasifika students to construct their own identities and to carry out their 'identifying process', and instead they were resigned to conforming to, or rebelling against, the identities that have been constructed for them.

What is an 'identifying process'? I have theorized that it is what students 'do' in forming their identity, that is, the way that they carry out the process of constructing their identity. If this process, and the results of it, are not valued by the school, then students are unable to recognize themselves as they wish to be represented. A 'process of identifying' is more than simply acknowledging the cultural differences that the students bring with them into the school. It is the students' own 'forming' of who they wish to be, how they wish to become, and how they want to carry out this process so

that they see themselves in the processes and structures of the school, and feel a sense of belonging within the school and the education system.

How do schools allow for an 'identifying process' to take place? This question is not to suggest that schools have the power to permit or discourage such a process as this process takes place irrespective of the schools' permission. The school's power inheres in the value it gives to this 'identifying process'. This includes not only "allowing" for the process to take place but actually "valuing" the necessity of the process, and recognizing the limitations that the schools have in being representative of, and being able to, represent all students.
The 'identifying process' is best understood through an analogy of a "class photo". Looking for, and finding ourselves in a class photograph is what each of us does when we are given a picture of our school days. No matter how often we look at those pictures, the first person we look for is our self. If we are not there, we notice our absence. It is the same with our experiences of school. We know by looking beyond the superficial displays of culture whether or not we are represented within a school culture.
Thus, an 'identifying process' describes the looking at, seeing, and recognizing of oneself in the school picture, and if that is not there, then finding ways to be able to do so. If one does not feel a recognition of oneself in the "school's picture", we need to ask why. It can mean two things: that the school does not allow for us to find ourselves there, or that the school does not recognize the need for an 'identifying process'. In that case, how do we teach for an awareness of an 'identifying process'? One way is by looking at how the school is organized to interpret the presence of others. If a school's organizational structures allows for a dominance (of success) by one particular group and does not attempt to ameliorate this situation, or worse, moves to justify it, then it does not allow for such a process. As such, allowing for an 'identifying process' is tied up with dismantling inequalities of identifying and representing. Allowing for an 'identifying process' extends Gewirtz's (2001) concept of social justice because it relies on redistributing the power relationship that exists between the education system and Pasifika students to incorporate the way in which Pasifika students see themselves, how they wish to be seen, and to see themselves in all aspects of the education system.

The theorizing of an 'identifying process' is connected with the idea of identity as originating from the person without requiring the permission of society, and of representing as an essential outcome. This is not to say that society does not help us shape who we are, but how we wish to process who we are or how we want our 'identifying process' to take place depends entirely on us. Without this, representations of us become how we are meant to be seen by others, rather than how we ourselves wish to be seen. This does not mean that generalizations of particular groups cannot, or should not, be made, but that these generalizations should be the images that are constructed from the groups themselves, and not be widely held assumptions created by, and for the benefit of, a dominant group. Generalizations do not implicitly define who members of a particular group which to be, or are becoming, and while they may be useful, generalizations must serve as the basis for a fair and valued acceptance of how we want to be represented.

Why is it necessary to know how a process of identifying takes place? I believe that the absence of such a process has consequences for many ethnic minority groups under the impact of globalization, and knowledge of how such a process takes place is crucial in being able to recognize its presence. Schools are not so much able to allow the 'identifying process' to take place as they are able to deny it from being valued. When schools continue to represent the dominant identity as the norm, they are failing to carry out their own 'identifying process', that is, their own constructions of who they are,

and have not allowed their students to do the same. Instead, the school has remained in control of the images and representations that it presents and detached from the 'identifying process'. Schools need to acknowledge that they too must also carry out their own 'identifying process' if they are to recognize the 'identifying process' of students, and that they must incorporate the students' 'identifying process' to the same extent, and to the same value as their own if they are to prevent the marginalization of particular student groups.

The claim of this paper therefore is that being able to construct one's identity, under the dominant influence of globalization, is a condition of educational success. The aim of this paper is to advocate for the space to foster the development of an 'identifying process' within schools that allows for students to bring, form, or connect with, their own representations of who they wish to be, and for those representations to be as valued as all other currently dominant representations and identities within educational institutions.

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